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Willingness to Communicate Reappraised in the Light of Emotional Intelligence and Gender Differences

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Abstract

Central to various recent learners-fronted teaching methodologies has been the notion of learner-initiated classroom exchanges and what has recently come to be known as willingness to communicate (WTC). Though manifold studies, to date, have been conducted on varied aspects and components underlying a satisfactory flow of communication among the peers in the language class, the potential role some emotional and social variables might play in this process seem to have gone partly unnoticed. Thus, in an attempt to address this rather underresearched area of scrutiny, the researchers in the current study embarked on an in-depth analysis of the viable go-togetherness between learners' emotional intelligence and their willingness to communicate. Another preoccupation of the researcher in the current study was pinpointing the potential relationship between learners' gender and their emotional intelligence as well as willingness to communicate. To this end, Bar-On's (1997) emotional quotient inventory and McCroskey's (1992) Willingness to communicate scale were administered to a total of 200 academic Iranian EFL learners. Through the final analysis of data, it was revealed that positive significant amounts of correlation held between learners' willingness to communicate and their emotional intelligence level. The mean scores on the subscales of two employed questionnaires were also found to significantly correlate with one another. Furthermore, in line with the gained results, learners' gender differences also played a significant role in configuring the findings, with females being characterized as the outperforming group both in terms of emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate.

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1. Introduction

According to Williams and Burden (1997), language teaching and learning processes are among the most important and intricate human endeavors. Part of this inherent complexity of education, in general, and language education, in particular is thought to emanate from the complicated nature of human beings. Thus, it is thought, a successful educator is the one who can deal with the complexities of the teaching-learning process and can draw upon his/her knowledge to act in ways which empower learners both within and beyond the classroom situations. Amid the manifold axioms underlying triumphant language learning one may refer to the key role played by psychological factors and individual/learner variables. Though several influential 'individual factors', including anxiety, inhibition, extroversion/introversion, self-esteem, motivation, learning styles, etc., have been listed by theoreticians and scholars in the field of education (e.g. Arnold & Brown, 1999; Lightbown & Spada, 2006), learners' emotions and, as the researchers in the current study argue, emotional intelligence play a more significant part in motivating individuals to learn. Positive emotions, for instance, can facilitate the language learning process and improve learners' language performance, while negative emotions will bring barriers to language learning and reduce learners' learning capacity (Meng & Wang, 2006).

Learning a second language is looked upon as a monolithic challenge in a person's life. This is partly so because learners are different not only in how they deal with learning, but also in terms of their feelings regarding learning circumstances. Almost all affect-driven learning theories, including Guiora's (1972) concept of 'ego permeability', Krashen's (1982) 'affective filter hypothesis' and Schumann's (1986) 'acculturation model', draw on the centrality of the fact that without motivation and positive feelings about learning, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for learners to get immersed in the process of learning. Thus, learners' fervor for learning and, so to speak, their willingness to communicate (WTC) and participate in ongoing learning processes is claimed in the current research to be following from the extent to which learners are capable to adapt to new learning environment. Thus, it follows that learners' emotional intelligence might be said to play a part in this respect, and this is what the current study seeks to explore. In other words, this study is mainly after pinpointing the potential correlation between learners' emotional intelligence and their willingness to communicate. To move toward this objective, the following research questions were put forth:

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate and their emotional intelligence?
2. Is there any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate?
3. Is there any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate with strangers?
4. Is there any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate with acquaintances?
5. Is there any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate with friends?
6. Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate?
7. Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners' emotional intelligence?

2. Literature Review

Tracing the outset of research on WTC as a self-contained domain of scrutiny may take us back to 1970s when Burgoon (as cited in Zarrinabadi & Abdi, 2011, p. 206) developed the notion of 'unwillingness to communicate' which she then delineated as "enduring and chronic tendency to avoid or devalue oral communication." Yet, as Peng (2007) asserts, the true naissance of the concept of WTC should be ascribed to attempts by McCroskey and his colleagues (e.g. McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, 1990, 1991), aimed at capturing "the trait-like personality that individuals display in first language (L1) communication"

(Peng, 2007, p. 34).

Among the definitions set forth for WTC, mention can be made of McIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels' (1998) delineation where they characterize it as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person, or persons, using a L2” (cited in Riasati & Noordin, 2011, p. 75). Moreover, the definition of WTC proposed by MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Donovan (2003) describes the term as “...the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice” (cited in Baghaei, Dourakhshan & Salavati, 2012, p. 55). Furthermore, Kang's (2005, p. 291) definition of WTC goes like this: “*an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation*, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables.”

Different strategies have been proposed, throughout the history of research on WTC, to augment learners' willingness for communication, among which reference can be made to Freiermuth and Jarrell's (2006) probe in which the positive effect of online chat on furthering students' WTC is underscored, and Reinders and Wattana's (2011) scrutiny, which reports on the effectiveness of utilizing digital games as a means of enhancing learners' WTC – Further evidence for the influence of playing games on boosting learners' WTC is provided by Wang and Erlam (2011) in a research performed in the Japanese context of education. Furthermore, in an attempt to gauge the possible effect of mode of communication on the amount of WTC, Lewis (2011) found that in spite of learners' ostensible preference for face to face communication, it is oral computer mediated communication that can produce more communication proclivity in individuals.

Since its inception, the concept of willingness to communicate has been investigated from a variety of different perspectives. For instance, in their hunt for the status of WTC within kids learning Persian as their first language, Birjandi and Amiri (2011) devised a modified version of WTC based on guidelines from McCroskey and Richmond (1985) and concluded that WTC should be regarded as both a social characteristic and a personality factor that underlies the process of first language development in children.

Despite the miscellaneous nature of studies conducted on WTC, the majority of research allotted to this area seems to fall within either correlational or exploratory research. Within the first body of research reference can be made to Peng's (2007) work which was after finding the potential relationship between learners' willingness to communicate and their motivation. Conducting the study on a sample of 174 Chinese college students, the researcher found that while motivation strongly predicted WTC, participants' attitudes toward learning was not found to be a strong predictor of individuals' willingness to communicate.

Moreover, in an attempt to gauge learners' willingness to communicate in relation to their orientations concerning language learning, Zarrinabadi and Abdi (2011) chose a sample of 67 intermediate academic learners. To tap the data, the adapted version of MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Conrod's (2001) WTC questionnaire was utilized. The researchers in this study garnered information about both learners' inside and outside-the-class willingness for communication, and found that participants' WTC outside the class correlated more with their language orientations.

In a similar vein, Léger and Storch (2009) examined the viable role of learners' attitudes and perceptions of their own oral proficiency in heightening their WTC. Having administered self-appraisal questionnaires to some thirty two French learners, the researchers claimed that learners' attitudes can act as a highly determining factor in relation to their WTC. Furthermore, close linkages were reported to exist between participants' self-confidence and their willingness to communicate.

In another recent investigation, Barjesteh, Vaseghi and Neissi (2012) delved into the would-be linkages between context type and amount of WTC in learners. Through questionnaire administration aimed at tapping the learners' perceptions of the degree of WTC under different circumstances, the researchers in this study concluded that only two context types, i.e. group discussion and meeting, as well as one of the receiver types bring about the greatest amount of willingness to communicate in individuals.

The analysis of the potential bonds between different scales of WTC and success in foreign language learning, carried out by Baghaei, Dourakhshan, and Salavati (2012), came up with the conclusion that two subscales of WTC, i.e. the ones tapping learners' willingness to communicate with native speakers and in the school context, moderately correlated with participants' success in language learning, whereas the subscale of communication with nonnative speakers was not found to have a correlation with learners' success.

The exploratory research has mainly been concerned with pinning down the factors spawning WTC. As a case in point, running a probe into the major factors underlying Chinese learners' unwillingness to communicate, Liu and Jackson (2008) found that WTC correlates with factors like degree of foreign language anxiety and interest in learners, as well as learners' appraisal of their own language proficiency. The survey done by these researchers was a partially large-scale one conducted with 547 undergraduate non-English learners.

In like manner, Ghonsooly, Khajavy and Asadpour (2012) launched a probe into different potential factors underlying Iranian non-English learners' willingness to communicate. The findings of the study, which was carried out on 158 academic learners, provided the researchers with evidence concerning the go-togetherness between WTC and facets like learners' self-confidence and attitudes held toward target community.

In a later study conducted in the Chinese context of education, Fu, Wang and Wang (2012) set out with the aim of pinpointing the factors underlying learners' WTC. In so doing, 100 non-English institute learners were selected and through questionnaire administration, relevant data were gathered regarding the possible impact of facets like culture, personality, motivation, interest and confidence on participants' WTC. At the end, the researchers found that WTC correlates not only with these factors, but also with communicative tasks and topics applied to learners.

Finally, a more thoroughgoing hunt for the variables generating higher levels of willingness to communicate in learners led Cao and Philp (2006, p. 480) to maintain that "the group size, familiarity with interlocutor(s), interlocutor(s)' participation, familiarity with topics under discussion, self-confidence, medium of communication and cultural background" are among the principal factors giving rise to learners' WTC.

As the brief glimpse through the literature on WTC helped reveal, the history of research on the concept enjoys a good amount of depth and breadth. Yet, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no studies, to date, have attempted to link WTC to emotional aspects in individuals and hence to their emotional intelligence. Defined as "an array of non cognitive abilities, competencies, and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demand and pressures" (Bar-On, 1997, p. 14) or "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (Goleman, 1998, p. 375), emotional intelligence has been said to play a key role in learners' success both in academic (e.g. Matthews, Zeidner & Roberts, 2002), and life settings (e.g. Murphy, 2006; Palmer, Donaldson & Stough, 2002), and as the researchers in the current study discuss, in motivating learners to speak and communicate in classroom context.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Initially the participants of the study were 255 university learners majoring in TEFL, English Literature and English Translation at Islamic Azad University (Karaj and Shahr-e-Qods Science and Research Branches), who were taken from 10 intact classes. However, out of the entire number, only 200 were selected as the final participants of the study based on their average scores. It's worth noting that as learners' previous semester scores formed the basis of researchers' judgment about learners' eligibility for participating in the research, to cater for homogeneity concerns only those who were found to enjoy an intermediate level of proficiency were included in the study. Also, as gender was regarded as one of the research variables in the current investigation, the study sample represented a roughly equal share for both genders (87 males and 113 females). Finally, in terms of age variation,

participants were found to range between 20 and 30 years of age.

3.2 Instruments

Two types of instruments were used to collect the research data. The first one was McCroskey's (1992) *Willingness to Communicate Scale*. This scale is composed of 20 items. Eight of the items are fillers and 12 are scored as part of the scale. The scale is designed as a direct measure of the respondent's predisposition toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication. Use of the direct approach assumes the respondent is generally aware of her/his own approach/avoidance tendencies. The 12 items on the scale represent the crossing of three types of receivers with four types of communication context. Participants were supposed to respond by determining the percentage of times they would choose to communicate with each type of situation ranging from 0 for 'never' to 100 for 'always'. In the present study, students' scores in total willingness to communicate as well as their scores in willingness to communicate with strangers, acquaintances, and friends were considered and other subscales were left out. The reliability of the Willingness to Communicate Scale was estimated to be .92 by McCroskey (1992).

The second instrument was *Bar-On's Emotional Quotient Inventory* (EQ-i) which was originally developed by Bar-On in 1980s. The Emotional Quotient Inventory was used to measure the Emotional Intelligence of the participants. Bar-On's inventory is a self-report questionnaire that includes 133 Likert-scale items. To conduct the present study, the translated and domestically standardized version of this questionnaire (Samouei, 2005) was used; hence, the reduced version of the questionnaire which was utilized in the current study contained 90 items, which were designed in Likert-type format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.3 Procedure

At the outset of the research, a pilot study was conducted to detect any possible problems that participants might encounter in the main study. Participants of the pilot study were 50 students similar to those in the main study. The procedure of piloting EQ-i was the same as its actual administration in the main study. The amount of alpha for each subsection of the test was more than 0.80 which indicated acceptable internal consistency of items.

Successive to obtaining permission from the academic authorities of the targeted universities, first willingness to communicate questionnaire was given to all 255 participants, and meanwhile the purpose behind administering the questionnaires, as well as the necessary instruction regarding how to fill them, was provided to participants. The time allocated for filling this questionnaire was 45 minutes. Participants were also asked to complete the demographic part of the questionnaire seeking information concerning their age, gender, etc. Afterwards, Bar-On's EQ-i was distributed during the same session to all 255 participants, and to ensure the accuracy of learners' given responses they were briefed on how the answers were to be provided. In order for students to understand every statement vividly and to avoid any difficulty related to learners' possible lack of foreign language proficiency, the translated versions of both WTC and EQ-i scales were employed for data collection. Back-translation procedure was also carried out with regard to WTC (translated by the researchers in the current study) to ascertain that the translated version has the same interpretation.

3.4 Data Analysis

SPSS 17 was used to analyze the collected data. The first five research hypotheses were investigated through Pearson's correlation analyses and the coefficient of each correlation was calculated. To investigate the sixth and seventh research hypotheses two independent samples t-tests were conducted and the differences between males and females' WTC and EI were determined.

4. Results and Discussion

Research Hypotheses:

HO₁: There is not any statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate and their emotional intelligence.

Table 1. Correlation between WTC and EI

variables	N	Pearson correlation coefficient	Sig.
WTC & EI	200	0.22	*0.002

Table 1 shows the results of Pearson Correlation run between willingness to communicate (WTC) and emotional intelligence (EI). As Pearson correlation analysis indicates a *p*-value less than significance level of .05, there appears to be a significant relationship between EI and WTC. The Pearson correlation coefficient equals 0.22 and the correlation is found to be direct and positive. It means that learners' WTC increases with upward changes in their emotional intelligence and hence the first null hypothesis is rejected.

HO₂: There is not any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate.

The results of correlation analysis show that there are meaningful relationships between emotional intelligence subscales (intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, and general mood) and willingness to communicate (see Table 2). Each of these relationships is meaningful in the confidence level of .95 percent. Because there is not a meaningful relationship between willingness to communicate and stress management variables, in prediction analysis (linear multiple regression analysis) stress management variable will not be used in investigation of this hypothesis. Furthermore, the magnitude of relationships between willingness to communicate and subscales of EQ (Emotional quotient) ranges from a high of 0.28 for adaptability, to a low of 0.14 for general mood.

Table 2. Correlation between WTC and EI Subscales

WTC	N	Correlation Coefficient	Sig.
Intrapersonal	200	0.19	0.00*
Interpersonal	200	0.15	0.01*
Stress management	200	0.09	0.12
adaptability	200	0.28	0.00*
General mood	200	0.14	0.02*

HO₃: There is not any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate with strangers.

As the results of correlation analysis reveal, there are meaningful relationships between emotional intelligence subscales (intrapersonal, adaptability, and general mood) and willingness to communicate with strangers. Each one of these relationships is meaningful in the confidence level of .95 percent. The size of this correlation (as is shown in Table 3) varies between a low of 0.13, for the subscale of general mood, and a high of 0.23, for the subscale of adaptability.

Table 3. Correlation between WTC with Strangers and EI Subscales

WTC with Stranger	N	Correlation coefficient	Sig.
Intrapersonal	200	0.16	0.01*
Inter personal	200	0.09	0.10
Stress management	200	0.10	0.08
Adaptability	200	0.23	0.00*
General mood	200	0.13	0.03*

HO₄: There is not any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate with acquaintances.

In line with the results of correlation analysis depicted in Table 4, meaningful relationships are encountered between emotional intelligence subscales (intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, and general mood) and willingness to communicate with acquaintances. The correlation coefficients between the scale of willingness to communicate with acquaintances and subscales of adaptability, intrapersonal, interpersonal and general mood are 0.27, 0.17, 0.17, and 0.12, respectively.

Table.4 Correlation between WTC with Acquaintances and EI Subscales

WTC with Acquaintances	Correlation coefficient	N	Sig.
Intrapersonal	0.17	200	0.00*
Interpersonal	0.17	200	0.00*
Stress management	0.08	200	0.11
Adaptability	0.27	200	0.00*
General mood	0.12	200	0.03*

HO₅: There is not any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of emotional intelligence and Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate with friends.

As Table 5 helps reveal, a significant correlation holds between emotional intelligence subscales (intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, and general mood) and willingness to communicate with friends. Furthermore, the highest and the lowest correlation coefficients belong to the relationship between the scale of WTC with friends and the subscales of adaptability ($r = 0.25$) and general mood ($r = 0.13$), respectively.

Table 5. Correlation between WTC with Friends and EI Subscales

WTC	N	Correlation coefficient	Sig.
Intrapersonal	200	0.18	0.00*
Interpersonal	200	0.15	0.016*
Control stress	200	0.05	0.25
Adaptability	200	0.25	0.00*
General mood	200	0.13	0.03*

HO₆: There is not any statistically significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate.

To compare WTC between males and females, an independent samples t-test was run, the results of which are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6. Independent Samples t-test Run to Compare WTC between Males and Females

WTC	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	(sig.)	ETA
Female	113	72.90	15.79	-6.99	0.00	0.46
Male	87	52.83	22.89			

As Table 6 represents, the amount of gained *p*-value was less than .05, which is indicative of a significant difference between males and females in their WTC. Indeed, WTC mean in females' group (72.90) was greater than the one in males' group (52.83). Therefore, the sixth null hypothesis is rejected, as well.

HO₇: There is not any statistically significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners' emotional intelligence.

To compare the emotional intelligence between males and females, again use was made of another independent samples t-test, the results of which appear in Table 7.

Table 7. Independent Samples t-test Run to Compare EI between Males and Females

EI	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	(sig.)	ETA
Female	113	325.92	36.37	-2.71	0.00	0.18
Male	87	311.92	38.47			

Based on the results of independent samples t-test (reported in Table 7), a significant difference is encountered between males and females in terms of their emotional intelligence. Furthermore, the mean of females (325.92) is found to be higher than that of males (311.92). Thus, drawing on the data in this table and particularly considering the *p* value of .00, which is much smaller than the cut off point of .05, it can be claimed that a significant difference exists between the emotional intelligence of males and females and hence the last null hypothesis of research is also subject to rejection.

Though correlational research on WTC has mainly been concerned with the relationship between this trait in individuals' and aspects like motivation (e.g. Peng, 2007), language learning orientations (e.g. Zarrinabadi & Abdi, 2011), learners' attitudes and perceptions (e.g. Léger & Storch, 2009), levels of anxiety and interest, (e.g. Liu & Jackson, 2008) learners' self-confidence (e.g. Fu, et al., 2012; Ghonsooly, et al., 2012) and type of context (e.g. Barjesteh, et al., 2012), no research, to date, has been done on the correlation between emotional facets of individuals and their WTC. Thus, the mentioned body of investigations seems to be of simply partial relevance to the issue at hand. But then again, the current study might marginally corroborate the results of previous research on the bonds between WTC and diverse individual characteristics like motivation, attitudes, and learning orientations, anxiety and self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

As Gardner (1983) states, to fully understand the intricacy of the language learning process, teachers should pay attention to internal mechanisms and social interpersonal interactions involved in this process. According to Goleman (2001), emotional intelligence can be a great help to achieve this end since it not only serves as an internal mechanism, but also interlocks with the external environment. Based on the findings of this study, it can be

concluded that, learners' emotional intelligence might be regarded as one of the elements underlying individuals' willingness to communicate in language classes. Furthermore, as it was observed different subscales of Bar-On's EQ-i were involved in close terms with their WTC. Another piece of finding obtained in the current research was the significant differences holding between males and females in terms of both their emotional intelligence level and willingness to communicate.

In view of the obtained upshots in this study and drawing on the results of previous investigations dealing with the positive consequences of possessing high EQ and WTC levels (see, for instance, Matthews, et al., 2002, regarding the linkages between EQ and academic success, Murphy, 2006, and Palmer, et al., 2002, for the importance of EQ for gaining life success, and Baghaei, et al., 2012, concerning the implications of WTC for successful language learning), it can be claimed that furthering learners' EQ as well as their WTC should be among the principal preoccupations of any language instructor. Thus, the main challenge that may concern most language teachers might be how to come up with practicable ways to augment learners' EQ and their WTC. Though regarding emotional intelligence enhancement some guidelines have been provided by previous scrutinies (e.g. Alavinia, 2012), pinpointing the true requirements underpinning EQ enhancement is thought to be made possible merely through more intensive research on the issue. Finally, as gender differences are reported to give rise to disparities among learners in terms of both EQ and WTC, attention to such gender-induced tendencies, particularly in the case of co-ed classes, might help cater for better educational outcomes.

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